

The world is full of great stories that need to be told...which is why the old fashioned-muckraking of The Sauce is so important.
Nick Davies, author, *Flat Earth News*

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A YEAR ON THE SAUCE

BRENDAN MONTAGUE

A Year
on The Sauce

This is number of a strictly limited first edition of
400 copies, signed:

A Year on The Sauce

Brendan Montague



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The front page photograph was taken by Jess Hurd of Report Digital at a Stop the War Coalition protest at the Chilcot Inquiry in London. Similar images were broadcast and published the world over. The source of inspiration for the theatrical blood and Tony Blair mask was ... The Sauce.

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We operate a distinctive and ethical publishing philosophy in all areas of our business, from our global network of authors to production and worldwide distribution.

~~The Sauce attacks with original, sharp journalism — and old, blunt politics.~~

Iain Dale, Conservative commentator and Britain's most successful blogger

The world is full of great stories that need to be told. The sad thing is that the mainstream media do out fewer and fewer of them – which is why the old fashioned-muckraking of The Sauce is so important.

Nick Davies, author, Flat Earth News

The Sauce is a tasty blend of gutsy reporting, provocative analysis and passionate argument. In the best tradition of campaigning journalism, it speaks truth to power about immigration, human rights and much else besides. A great read.

Philippe Legrain, author, Aftershock and Immigrants: Why your country needs them

~~Brendan's primary concern is the success of the movements but this doesn't stop him getting re~~
scoops. His blog exposed the potential conflict of interests of Iraq Inquiry member Sir Roderic Ly
and gained unrivalled access to peace soldier Joe Glenton.

You can trust The Sauce.

Lindsey German, national convenor, Stop the War Coalition

Brendan Montague has all the right heroes: George Orwell, John Pilger, Paul Foot. Like them, he's
great upsetter of the conventional. The Sauce wants to get under the skin of the establishment and sta
there. Everyone who cares about maintaining the great tradition of investigative journalism should g
this book.

John Rees, author, Imperialism and Resistance

for Laura, never lost for words

Introduction

Men in Saville Row suits stream through the glass revolving door carrying cardboard boxes. This is the collapse of Lehman Brothers, a bank I hadn't heard of just a week before. A bank which almost brought down banking.

The glass monolith towering above me had been a monument to the power of modern global capitalism. Today, however, Lehman Brothers has proven to be anything but permanent or transparent. A 34-year-old stockbroker brushes past me and presses a single page of A4 into my hand.

The printed email is dated September 15, 2008 and is from Dick Fuld, the bank's chairman and CEO. The recipient had torn off their own address but the message was intact: it spelled the end of my career for our Asian source, the end of business for Lehman Brothers and, it seemed at the time, the beginning of the end of capitalism itself.

I filed the contents of the email to a copytaker at the Sunday Times over the phone from shorthand notes scratched across a scruffy notepad. The world was changing and I had an exclusive leaked email. It felt all the world like journalism. But I sensed this particular assignment would be among my last for the broadsheet.

The financial system was on a precipice and my Treasury source was telling me privately that major High Street banks were just days away from bankruptcy. This would have meant cash machines in every city and town closing, queues far longer than those already seen outside the crumbled Northern Rock. Rioting, perhaps.

The "credit crunch" swiftly produced a major slump in newspaper advertising. This in turn was the perfect excuse for the Sunday Times to implement some "restructuring". It wasn't long before I received my own email inviting me to leave the building. My last job for editor John Witherow was reporting from the Right to Work march along the Thames on April Fool's Day. I didn't file any copy.

The night before I had walked along the cobbles of Pennington Street just outside the satanic mill which is the Wapping printing presses and offices of News International. I came to know it as the Factory – although so much of what was produced was fiction. I could hear the cries of rioting print workers from yesteryear but for the life of me I couldn't smell newsprint. Just a waft of scorched fumes from the drive-through McDonald's.

My shoes were worn at the heel from "crunching gravel" – visiting people's front doors – and my leather pilot's jacket weighed heavy.

Gone were the days of flying in a prop plane to the Isle of Sark at a moment's notice to investigate the owners of the Telegraph. There would be no more sipping Champagne at lingerie launches in Mayfair and dining with hotel security guards in search of Russian spies – paid for on expenses.

Redundancy from a newspaper had previously meant a change of desk and a change of masthead. There was usually a shift here and there for a good reporter. But this time I turned my back on Fleet Street.

And I had never felt so elated. The coming year would surely see the avalanche of financial catastrophe reach street level. I remembered the sting of teargas and adrenaline I felt during the anti-G8 protests in Genoa in 2001. I thought of Orwell walking along Las Ramblas in Barcelona with the cafes filled with talk of insurrection.

Besides, the journalism I dreamed of was long dead when I arrived at the Sunday Times. The man who killed it is my old boss Rupert Murdoch. The price war from the Times, the closure of the Insight Team, the annual cull of 10 percent of staff which continues as I write. All these were the nails in its coffin. The website paywall will be the tombstone.

In this era, journalists are confined to the office and rely almost exclusively on news wires and private photographs snatched from Facebook. It's a sleep-deprived blur of air conditioning, neon lighting and avocado sandwiches from Marks and Spencer.

So this is what I was turning my back on as I walked along Pennington Street. And ahead of me there was a brave new world. The iPhone in my pocket offers instant blogging, streaming live video and print quality photographs. I can capture everything and within seconds it is available for the whole world to see.

On June 3 I found myself eating lunch on the first floor of the Coach and Horses pub in Soho with the journalists from Private Eye. Among the other guests were Heather Brooke, who submitted the Freedom of Information request that exposed the MPs expenses, Mark Seddon and Peter Osborne.

My hands were shaking from hangover – a symptom which was only cured with two bottles of Chablis. I imagined the late Paul Foot – whose portrait still hangs on the wall – sat at this very table arguing for socialism with his public school chums over the fish pie.

There was much banter, the exchange of ideas, the bartering of stories and leads. Sources getting sozzled and telling tails. All under Chatham House rules. It felt all the world like a scene from Claret Cockburn's Years of the Week. Or one of the old hacks' reminiscences from the Gentleman Ranters blog about fights outside the Stab in the Back.

This felt like journalism. As I returned to sobriety it became all too clear. I could turn my back on Fleet Street but I couldn't shake off the impulse to be a journalist. There must be a way to convince people to invest directly in investigative journalism now that newspaper proprietors have stopped doing so? The two things I needed were sources of information and then buying customers for that information. Supply and demand. I needed to create a network of agents and of readers.

This is the reason The Sauce sprang into being as a genuine, regular blog. The name comes from the journalist's affectionate expression for booze with the obvious reference to "a source" of information or tittle tattle. It was also a pun borne from necessity: all the web addresses with "source" had long been snapped up.

And so the blog, like its name, is a mongrel. Its genes come from a long lineage of campaigning reporting and old Fleet Street hackery. But it also contains the DNA of an entirely new breed of "citizen journalism" – researching, publishing and marketing from the kitchen table. The question remained: could a blogger with no investigations budget, no marketing spend and – at the beginning – precious few readers ever have any influence? Can journalism take place without a newspaper?

And to top it all when I finally bit the bullet and readied myself to report the meltdown absolutely nothing happened. Gordon Brown during his cameo as Prime Minister spent £200 billion on quantitative easing, bank shares and loans making sure nothing happened. Yes, a wind turbine factory was occupied by a score of workers. But we were about as far from a general strike as any time since 1926. So had I sacrificed the good life for nothing? Was Threadneedle Street too tightly sewn into transglobal capital to fail? Are we too civilised to fall about rioting?

A few weeks ago you would, with great justification, have had me down as a Don Quixote tilting at imaginary imploding hedge funds. I was no John Reed witnessing the world being shook. Nonetheless The Sauce has proven brilliant fun. These vignettes – running to 150,000 words posted in just over 1

months – record a fascinating historical moment populated by some intriguing characters. So much so that I have only managed to whittle the online version down to a third of its original length.

Contained on these pages are the stories of the Russian oligarch attempting to sell fertilizer produced in a factory contaminated with nuclear waste, Tara Palmer-Tomkinson's ghastly alter ego, the Tory MP (at the time of posting he was a general election candidate) profiting from Chinese factories.

And the heroes: the security guard on £9.50 an hour who alone guards one of Heathrow's gates, the asylum seeker escaping deportation to the country where she was raped, the economist warning about America's subprime double dip.

But having been converted to the internet, why convert the blog to print? Why would anyone buy a book when all these words appear for free at The Sauce? The mock Daily Mail front page I've always wanted to see is: "END OF WORLD – TOMORROW: Souvenir Edition".

What the world wide web fails to satisfy is the desire for preservation. The 18 months following Lehman Brothers are absolutely fascinating. And if journalism represents the first draft of history then this book can be considered a few scattered but salient notes that might just be worth keeping.

And who knows? Some east London gangster might sue and close down the blogger account. You might get lucky – I might get shot in Afghanistan and this little pamphlet might be worth a few bob. At the other extreme, the world might run out of oil and the internet might go out. You'll want something to read to pass the time.

What if I am right? What if these moments represent the beginning of something bigger? Something I can capture as a reporter. Something I can access as an activist.

I am proofreading the first edition of this book while on a flight to Greece. Just 1,485 miles from my kitchen table in South London a colossal bubble of debt hidden beneath the very earth by Goldman Sachs has erupted. The burning lava of general strike, riots and petrol bombs pours through the streets and I want to see it, smell it, feel the heat against my face.

At home we now have a Conservative-led coalition government which the Tories themselves concede is likely within six months to be the most unpopular in a generation. There will be £6 billion in cuts to public services with unions pressured into fighting every penny.

The Sunday Times is bound to support power. The Sauce will be supporting the people. So will the gamble on news happening everywhere but Wapping pay off after all? If so, The Sauce will be in the thick of it. And it will want to tell your story. The blog is only as good as its sources – and you, reading this now, are my next source.

If you are going on strike, I can find the wages and assets of your chief executive. If you are fighting deportation I can put you in touch with a good solicitor. If you know your company is polluting the planet I will help gather the evidence and get the publicity you need.

If you have a story like those contained here then email me at news@the-sauce.org or call me on 07590 030201. Keep this book close – you never know when you might need it.

A spectre is haunting Europe. The spectre is the collapse of neo-liberalism. The question now is whether its shadow will be cast across London in anything like the same way as Athens? Will the first year of The Sauce contain within it the back story to life changing events? Will it prove a prelude to history?

Moz Def: You were good in your time

Tuesday, December 16, 2008

The new album is like an exquisite suit, with all the coloured threads you would hope for in a Morrissey release. These threads are embroidered with the fine dark blues of vigorous drumming and panoramic open guitars.

The black and greys of his themes of love lost and abandoned, rejection, grief and all those human emotions with which we associate this great lyricist. The purple of homoerotic undertones.

There is also the fine gold thread of a brilliant sense of humour which has lifted Morrissey's versatility since *Still Ill* to this current crop of songs.

I was lucky enough to be invited to the first press play of *Years of Refusal* at The Pigalle club in London's Piccadilly with Morrissey himself taking the extremely rare opportunity to introduce the album in person.

Dressed sombrely in v-necked jumper and shirt, he took to the stage for 46 seconds. He then sat and listened to two songs before making for the exit.

Being a few tables away from himself, a glass of wine in one hand and a vegetarian spring roll in the other will be my highlight of 2008. Unfortunately, when it came to the music his finery is too familiar.

There are no songs on this album which move the Morrissey canon forward, no surprising new sounds and nothing in the words worth listening out for. There are hints of *Tormentors* in the quality of the performance and production and memories of *Your Arsenal* in the use of samples.

But it lacks the sense of place which *The Smiths* epitomised (Manchester) and which *Tormentors* regained (Rome). There is nothing really Parisian about *I'm Throwing My Arms Around Paris*. As the needle lifts from the vinyl, I have no real insight into the latest chapter in Morrissey's life. Sadly, the album cover is the best and most surprising feature.

As with all Morrissey's albums I will eventually acquire a great affection for this record, but there remains a fear that this is because of my loyalty to a true musical monarch: that I am unable to see through the emperor's clothes.

Crisis, What Crisis? Uber rich carry on spending despite economic calamity

Wednesday, December 17, 2008

Forget chatter about finding a perfect au pair. The talk of the table in Britain's finest houses is shortage of trusted and talented staff to nurture the family pot plants.

Households in London's fashionable Chelsea, upmarket Mayfair and the most exclusive areas of Surrey are spending up to £14,000 a year to make sure their flowers are always in bloom.

Roman Abramovich, the Russian energy billionaire and chairman of Chelsea football club, hires a staff of two to make sure his plants are always in perfect condition before he arrives home at his Knightsbridge mansion.

Staff working for the 42-year-old, who last year was worth an estimated £11.7 billion and England's second richest resident, are always fastidious in making sure two £1,000 topiary small-leaf hollies outside his home are pruned and polished to perfection.

Petr Kellner, 44, worth an estimated £4.7 billion last year, making him the richest man in his native Czech republic, likes to have his orchids gently sprayed and rotated before he returns to his London home. The £1,500 cloud-pruned Ilex Crenata must be leaf perfect.

Graham Wiley, the founder of software company Sage, also has a specialist staff which advises where best to place his favourite orchids, and to water and nurture them. The task takes between half an hour and an hour every 10 days.

One of the house-plant gardeners to the rich and famous said: "They're all filthy rich and have unbelievably spectacular homes. Some of our clients have a lot of money, and spend an absolute fortune just on plants."

Andrew Davidson, 25, has set up Leaf-It-At-Home, which supplies pot plants to the rich, including Abramovich, for up to £8,000 and then charges £500 a month to water, feed and maintain them.

He said: "The very rich like their pot plants to form part of the internal décor and they have to be absolutely perfect all the year round. I will spend an hour, sometimes every week, watering, clipping, changing blooms, polishing leaves, taking away any dead petals, and rotating the plants.

"The security around Abramovich is extremely tight and his staff run the place like a military machine. I will never be in the house while he is there but the plants we supply him have to be in perfect whenever he is arriving home. I've met his first wife – but never spoken to him."

Most wealthy families will fill their homes with fresh blooms. But with fresh flowers now commanding £150 for each display from the smartest London florists – and five or six bunches needing replacing every week – many are now turning to pot plants instead.

Montgomery Burns: Mirror, Mirror up against the wall

Tuesday, December 23, 2008

The recession will hit millions of “hard working families” really hard, and it scares me. Because, and in spite of this we have to take any pleasures where we can find them.

Be it the revelation about Madoff (pronounced made-off) defrauding the stupendously wealthy and stupid of a generous helping of their ill-gotten gains, or the fact the man at the helm of the most significant company collapse in almost a century was called Dick Fuld (pronounced fold).

The names in this current tragicomedy suggest to me the dead hand of a playwright, as though we are stuck in a sequel to Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

So, a little snippet of news tucked away in the back of the Guardian made me laugh until I cried. “The embattled media empire run by former Mirror Group boss David Montgomery secured a two-month stay of execution yesterday as it tries to renegotiate its debts amid rising concern about its future.

“Mecom, which has debts of almost £600m, compared with a stock market value of £13.5m, said it was in talks with its banks about amending its overdraft ‘so as to provide financial stability in the medium term’.

“Its lenders have agreed not to check whether it is in breach of the covenants attached to its loans on 31 December, as originally planned, but on 28 February instead. Mecom in return is to pay a one-off fee of €2.5m (£2.35m) to its banks and increase its interest payments by the equivalent of a 1.75-point rise in the interest rate, which is likely to cost it millions more unless a deal can be done quickly.”

Reporters older than me will know of David Montgomery. He was the man who “modernised” *The Mirror*. He swept the features desk clear of all those public school revolutionaries, destroying the *NU* before it destroyed the newspaper.

He kept the boat afloat when Maxwell was bobbing around in the sea. The old ideologues in the *Mirror* chapel squawked about standards. But they were only interested in their fellow members and were afraid of progress, afraid of history and the brave new world of lower costs and higher profits. And the printers, don’t get me started on the printers.

Today’s *Mirror* is a testament to the Montgomery vision. The share price of Trinity Mirror has tanked from £6.25 in January 2006 to a low of 29.25p: a headache-inducing 84 percent wiped off the market value in the last 12 months. The market capitalisation has now fallen from £1.3billion to £132m.

The readership once hit four million (higher if you believe the tales about the executives lying to keep sales figures down because of a bonus promised to staff once it broke through that landmark). Now it’s 1.4 million and falling. Apparently, the plan was to asset strip the company and dump it on some gilded fool of a venture capitalist.

Richard Stott, the editor of the *Daily Mirror* from 1985 to 89 and 1991 to 92, wrote in the *Independent* back in March 2005: “During Montgomery’s tenure of more than six years he destroyed the infrastructure of the *Mirror*.”

“The staff that gave the paper its own unique flavour all went – the spectacular removal of Paul Foot and Alastair Campbell are the two best remembered, but there was a host of others. Montgomery’s bag carriers were immediately appointed as editors to cull journalists.

“The circulation plunged by more than 500,000 copies, 18 per cent of the total sale. Altogether the three papers, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror and The People, lost 1,722,420, [which is] 5,000 more than the then entire circulation of The People.”

The gap between The Sun and the Mirror in England and Wales doubled to more than one million. The ringleader of the public school revolutionaries was Paul Foot – the campaigning Mirror journalist who inspired the Paul Foot Award. Foot was guided by his Marxist ideology and would not imagine there being life after death. Were he looking down, this would be one of the few moments of the recession he would have enjoyed.

Of course, his warnings that slashing investment in journalism would slaughter the golden goose were, I hope I have established here, proved wrong by history. The decline of the Mirror is actually the fault of the readers, who only want celebrity stories not daft warnings about housing price bubbles. It is because of the internet, and because of the worldwide credit crisis. Forces beyond our control.

Back to today’s report in The Guardian: “Mecom insiders said it should not be assumed that the company was going to breach its banking covenants, which would have plunged the business into crisis, but analysts reckon that scenario was getting very close.

“Montgomery, who is executive chairman, said he hoped to have a new banking deal and a number of disposals finalised early in the new year. ‘The deterioration in global economic activity continuing to affect advertising adversely in our markets’.”

Terror Error: Israelis more likely to die from LSD than Hamas rockets

Friday, January 23, 2009

The argument over Israel has become about statistics more than children buried under the rubble, hospitals, students fleeing phosphorous bombs, water and food shortages or even land.

The BBC reports more than 1,300 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, with 5,000 injured and quotes the UN stating 66 percent of the 1.5m population had no power.

The numbers from the pro-Palestinians about Gaza include 50,000 left homeless, 400,000 without water, and 84 percent without food, 40 percent with no electricity, 26 medical clinics hit, and 8 percent of the people receiving no aid at all.

This post, however, was inspired by some statistics quoted on the Iain Dale blog in a very memorable post back in December 29. Iain poses as a liberal Conservative, but for the purpose of this missive can be taken as representing those on the right who support Israel.

He wrote: "According to Conservative Friends of Israel, over the past week more than 300 rocket missiles and mortar rounds have been fired from Gaza by Hamas and other militants at Israeli villages and towns.

"More than 560 have been fired since Hamas escalated rocket firing on 4 November. This is only one of the 5,000 which have been fired from Gaza this year. The media seem to think these rockets are fairly harmless. They are not. They are weapons of terror."

I have said that I want to add the occasional fact, rather than blog constant comment about information already available on the internet or in today's newspapers. So I want to present some statistics of my own.

They are not as emotive nor significant as those presented above. But I hope they make you think about what has taken place in Gaza. They may also have some bearing on the "war on terror" and our perception of risk: our fear of bombs and terrorist attacks in the UK despite there being no deaths from such attacks last year.

A major justification – indeed from where I was sitting, the only given justification – for the military action was the fear of Hamas rockets. It was the Israeli population's perception of risk which prompted the IDF to start this offensive, says Iain.

First of all, I simply have to quote the Associated Press: "Israeli casualties were relatively low, 13, compared with some 1,300 Palestinians killed, according to Gaza health officials."

According to the Independent, the total number of Israeli civilians killed by rockets in 2008 was six. To quote: "Seventeen people have been killed in attacks from Gaza this year, including nine civilians, six of whom died from rockets, and eight soldiers, according to Israel's Foreign Ministry."

And now to some new, exclusive statistics. The six Israeli civilian deaths is actually far fewer than the average number of Israelis killed each year because of pneumonia (407), or the number killed by transport accidents (296). In fact it is fewer than the number killed by "mental and behavioural disorders due to psychoactive substance use" (37) and fewer than those killed through "intentional self-harm" (222).

The average Israeli is more likely to die from taking drugs or committing suicide. They are actually more likely to die from "falls" (37).

These figures above are calculated from statistics published by the Israeli Government's Central Bureau of Statistics.

Myners Strikes: This is not any share crash – this is an M&S share crash

Saturday, January 24, 2009

Baron (Paul) Myners has every right to be angry about stockbrokers pocketing millions in bonus while running banks into the ground.

Yesterday, he spluttered: “I have met more Masters of the Universe than I would like to, people who were grossly over-rewarded and did not recognise that. Some of that is pretty unpalatable. There are people who have no sense of the broader society around them. There is quite a lot of annoyance and much of that is justified.”

He is absolutely correct. Why should these Masters of the Universe be richly rewarded for riding the crest of a wave – a manoeuvre almost impossible not to achieve on the trading floor for so long.

We should just be grateful that we don't have to listen to these “dick wavers” – as one bank's press officer described them to me yesterday – now that their fortunes have been revealed as a mirage, fraud almost.

Myners' own stash of 278,741 shares was worth about £1,597,185.93 and this wealth, and his stature, continued to bulge. On his 60th birthday last year (April Fools' Day, no less) the share price reached a peak at £7.59. His pot, at its biggest, would have been worth £2,115,644.19. So how much would this piggy bank be worth today?

A measly £620,298.61 – which means Myners, if he has not bought or sold a share since then, has lost a rather upsetting £1,492,658.06 or a scrotum tightening 70 percent of his personal wealth invested in M&S shares.

Let's put these numbers into some perspective. Paul was head of the Low Pay Commission which recommended the level of the minimum wage, currently £3.53 for under 18s.

So a 17-year-old earning the minimum wage while working eight hour days, 365 days a year, would be aged 145 by the time he'd earned back this loss (with no money for rent, food or the cinema).

Erm, so why is he now City Minister, appointed by Gordon Brown to tell us about corporate greed and the failure of those at the top to realise they were going to drive us right into the dust at the bottom?

PS: Myners handed £12,700 to Brown's leadership campaign.

UPDATE: This from the FT in 2006 has a certain poignancy: “Paul Myners summed it up as he looked over his glasses at the 580 private shareholders gathered at Marks and Spencer's annual meeting in Birmingham yesterday and told them it was a ‘real wrench’ to quit the chairmanship after two highly charged years at the helm of the clothing and food chain.

“‘I have loved doing this job,’ said an emotional Mr Myners, in his closing remarks to shareholders at Birmingham's International Convention Centre. ‘Were it not for the private shareholders – it would not be the City institutions or the big pension funds – M&S would today not be a public company under public ownership but a private company in the hands of the few’.”

Taken for a Ride: Addison Lee drivers left with small change if you pay by card

Saturday, February 21, 2009

If you are getting a cab home, there is a fair chance you are using Addison Lee. The firm is rapidly approaching a monopoly in the Metropolis.

The use of cutting edge technology – satellites to locate cars closest to customers and rapid texting – certainly makes it one of the best cab firms to use.

You can also set up an account paying by credit card, so no more stumbling around in the gutter trying to find the £1 coin you dropped in a drunken rage.

The company is leaps and bounds ahead in terms of safety, sending car registration numbers and drivers' mobile numbers to customers, something that would give me great reassurance if I was a woman getting into a stranger's car.

John Griffin, chairman of London minicab group Addison Lee lives in a fantastic detached house on The Avenue, Potters Bar, Herefordshire surrounded by luscious green fields, miles from the clogged up roads his drivers face day in day out.

He gained national publicity when he told The Mail on Sunday back in 2005 that he wanted to clean up the "institutionally corrupt" private hire business.

But is there another reason Addison Lee has grown massively, and last year made John Griffin and his investors £31 million in gross profit?

Surely its success is not actually based on exploiting its drivers more than its under-invested and shady rivals?

The black cab trade is certainly suffering from the recession, and this one can only assume will also be true of private hire. However, last year at least Addison Lee, which is based in William Road, London NW1, was doing incredibly well.

The 2007 accounts reveal the company had a turnover of £72 million, and a gross profit of £31 million. The seven company directors of the company shared a £7.8 million pay pot. Just four years previously Addison Lee made £8.8 million from £18.4 million.

Ask the average Addison Lee driver about this phenomenal success and he or she will probably give you the same answer. The company, which hires cars to drivers and tells them where to pick up and drop off customers, seems to be putting its hand deep into their pockets.

Book a taxi and pay by cash, and the driver will get 90 percent of the fare, which is about the same as your average out-of-the-back-of-a-closed-down-shop operation.

However, pay by credit card – which of course the really profitable corporate accounts and big spenders do – and the driver gets just 50 percent. The drivers complain that with the average, run-of-the-mill £11 fare, they will get just £5.50.

A few minutes waiting for the customer, or getting stuck in London's perennial heavy traffic, and your driver is actually in danger of earning less than the minimum wage.

One angry customer told me: "Add Lee adds an administration fee to credit card bookings, so essentially they're [getting more money from] both the passenger and driver, by charging extra for using a card but paying the driver less – with the 50 percent they [are asking of] the driver as pure profit. It doesn't pay for fuel, etc, as the driver has to pay for all of that, plus hire of the car, from the

wages each week!”

Note to lawyers: Drivers work on a self-employed basis, hiring the cars and paying the fees for support. So I am not here accusing Addison Lee of paying an illegally low wage. The drivers are in a position where they are doing that to themselves.

When you think that a few decades ago a black cab driver – still protected by regulations and the ‘closed shop’ of having to pay through the nose to learn The Knowledge – would earn often considerably more than £30,000 a year, we see another cushy job become a desperate slog.

So should we boycott Addison Lee? Well if you can afford to get a cab these days, you should pay cash and give the driver a half decent tip.

Hunger Striker: Student refuses food in protest at Tamil slaughter

Tuesday, April 14, 2009

A student who has been on hunger strike outside Parliament for eight days protesting against the killings of Tamils by the Sri Lankan Government could lapse into a coma at any moment.

Prameswaran Subramaniam, 28, a mature student from the war-torn Vennier region, began his fast after discovering five of his family – his parents, two brothers and a sister – were killed last Monday.

Medics from St John's Ambulance and NHS paramedics have been checking his condition every two hours and have warned his kidneys could fail and he could lapse into a coma.

Students who have organised mass protests and road sittings in Parliament Square have written Subramaniam asking him to end his life-threatening hunger strike.

The Metropolitan Police will intervene if the student, from Lancaster Gate University, loses consciousness. However, he told them yesterday: "I am on hunger strike until there is a ceasefire – I cannot watch any more of my people die."

Redshirts: Embassy targeted in Thailand democracy protest

Wednesday, April 15, 2009

Families and supporters of the Redshirt protesters in Thailand handed in a letter to the London embassy yesterday calling for an end to the killings and suppression of pro-democracy campaigners.

The missive, from Thai Red UK, was addressed to Mr Abhisit Vejjajiva and called for his resignation and for the current military-backed Government to be dissolved.

The letter was presented by 30 members of the campaign – which supports peasants and the urban poor against the yellow-shirt Royalists – to the embassy in Queen's Gate.

The letter stated: "Your use of the military, allowing them to use force in an attempt to clear the peaceful pro-democracy Redshirts has allowed the military to commit murder on your behalf..

"You personally promised there would be no loss of life, you have failed in that promise as you have failed in your many attempts to gain the trust of the people."

The Redshirts have called for the end of the state of emergency in place in Thailand, for troops to return to barracks, and for the soldiers responsible for the recent deaths to be brought to justice.

Killer Cops: Met chief warned “riot officers will kill” before Tomlinson death

Saturday, May 02, 2009

Britain’s most senior policeman, Sir Paul Stephenson, was warned in writing that police violence would lead to “serious injuries or even deaths” just three weeks before Ian Tomlinson was pushed to the ground and killed by an officer.

The Met Police commissioner was warned by senior organisers from the Stop the War Coalition that riot officers were so out of control they were putting the lives of protesters “at serious risk” in a formal letter – backed up by a dossier of evidence.

Ian Tomlinson, 47, was walking with his hands in his pockets through demonstrations close to the Bank of England in central London when he was forcefully shoved to the ground.

He died minutes later from internal injuries. Film footage of the incident soon emerged showing he had been moving away from the officer and undermining police claims they had come under a hail of bottles thrown by protesters.

It emerged this week that the StWC leaders supplied a detailed dossier of evidence listing injuries sustained by protesters against the Israeli military action in Gaza on Saturday, January 3 this year.

The StWC, which is supported by veteran campaigners Tony Benn and Bruce Kent, made specific allegations of perceived police violence, including “the indiscriminate use of batons” and the use of “riot shields as weapons”.

It stated: “The policing of this demonstration was irresponsible and disproportionate, putting demonstrators at serious risk and amounting to a police attack on a peaceful protest... there was a very real potential for serious injuries or even deaths.”

“We are aware of a number of the protesters who were hurt by the indiscriminate use of batons by the riot police or who were bowled over as the crowd tried to move back.

“Many demonstrators were also shocked and distressed as a result of the panic and confusion caused by the police attack.”

Chris Nineham, of the Stop the War Coalition, was chief steward on the day. He was quoted in the dossier describing how the marchers were led into an underpass near Hyde Park and attacked.

He wrote: “We waited for a few uneventful minutes and then without warning a line of riot police in [b]lack boiler suits charged at us, hitting marchers indiscriminately with their batons.

“There was pandemonium. Marchers from the front sprinted away from the charging police in a panic, knocking others over. There were screams from all sides. Everyone was terrified.

“Many were on the ground, some buried under others. The charge was repeated three times. I saw a number of people with blood on their faces and arms. One or two of them seemed to be in shock.

“During those four or five minutes I felt we were in a situation of extreme danger in which a serious injury or death was a very real possibility.”

Aceel Alrashidi, a demonstrator quoted in the report, added: “I, my sister and fellow peaceful demonstrators – some of which were children – were crushed on the floor with people piled on top of us.

“At this point thoughts of death were running through my mind as I literally started to hear the noises dim from the pressure of people on top of me. Through this the riot police irresponsibly

continued using force and persisted in pushing us back despite seeing several casualties.”

Another protester, whose identity is known to StWC but remained anonymous in the February dossier, added ominously: “When I got home I fully expected to hear on the news that (a) little girl had been trampled to death. But, fortunately, her mother must have got her out of the crowd in time.

“So no one did die. This police tactic succeeded. Not only that, but they got away with it with no public comment. The media have only reported the riot, not the police manoeuvre that provoked it. A publicity coup for the police. So they will do this again. And again. Until someone dies.”

Tomlinson was killed when walking home from his job as a newspaper vendor. Film captured by an unnamed eyewitness showed him being shoved to the ground by a riot officer just minutes before he died of internal injuries.

The death has led to widespread criticism of the policing of the event, including the controversial tactics of using a line of officers to surround and “kettle” in hundreds of protesters and wielding shields as weapons.

Now the Stop the War Coalition, along with CND, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and British Muslim Initiative, has called for the Metropolitan Police to ban the Tactical Support group from its demonstration on May 16.

The anti-war group has demanded in writing that protesters should not be “kettled” in or detained, that surveillance should be kept to a minimum, that they be given a direct line to the officer in charge, and that there is no concealment of police officers’ identities.

In a second letter sent this week, the group said: “We were, as you know, extremely unhappy with the policing round the Gaza demonstrations in January.

“The Stop the War Coalition wrote to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner in February attaching a dossier of incidents on the demonstrations and warning that continuing this level of policing would lead to serious injury or worse. We did not receive a reply.

“The concerns were borne out by some of the events of April 1, culminating in the tragic death of Ian Tomlinson.”

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